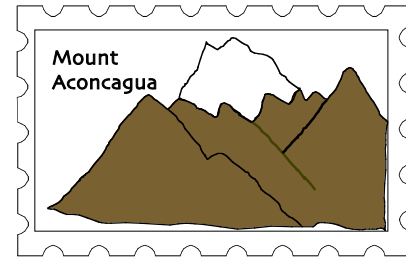


HELLO FRIENDS!

My name is Pablo, and it's my job to get you acquainted with the Andes Mountains, the largest mountain chain in the world! My family has lived in the steep Andes Mountains for many generations and knows the region well. We live in the town of Mendoza, Argentina, which is near Mount Aconcagua (pronounced Ah cone kah gwah), the highest peak in the Western Hemisphere.



The Andes Mountains are located in South America, running north to south along the western coast of the continent. The latitude is 10°N to 57°S. The longitude is 70°W to 80°W.

During the summer, my older brother Raul leads groups of climbers who wish to reach the summit of Mount Aconcagua. A few mules carry most of the gear up the steep slopes, but it still takes several days to reach the top of this giant volcano at 6,960 m (22,835 ft). It is an active volcano, meaning it could explode at any time!

Mount Aconcagua is in the middle of the longest mountain range in the world, the Andes Mountain Range, which is 7,250 km (4,500 miles) long! The Andes stretch from the hot tropical rainforests of Venezuela in the north to the cold tip of Patagonia in the south.

But this area isn't just snow-capped mountain peaks and harsh, unforgiving weather. There are many different environments in the Andes. For example, I just got back from visiting some of my relatives in the *altiplano*, which is a stretch of flat land between two

mountain chains. Did you ever think you could grow crops and raise livestock at such high elevations? My relatives on the *altiplano* between Peru and Bolivia grow grains and potatoes. They also raise sheep, llamas and alpacas.



The Andes are separated into three natural regions. In the northern region, it is hotter because it is closest to the equator. There are rain forests in this region due to the more humid, rainy climate. In the southern region, the mountains are nearer to the Antarctic, and it is much colder. It is not very populated in the southern area.

<http://www.blueplanetbiomes.org/andes.htm>

We also have some extreme ecosystems. There are deserts as well as rainforests in the lower elevations of the Andes, especially in places where the mountains drop sharply in elevation near the Pacific Ocean. Last summer, I was with a team of young scientists who visited the Atacama Desert in the Northern Andes. From there we went to the southern Andes and dense rainforests where the climate is warm but moist.

If you ever decide to visit the mountain chain, you'll have to bring lots of different types of clothing since you'll be going through all kinds of climates. And you wouldn't want to forget a camera, either! One of the greatest sights here is the sunset from the top of Mount Aconcagua.

As the sun dips down towards the west, the mountain peaks all turn a very pleasing copper-brown shade. It's a good reminder of all the minerals they mine here in the Andes, such as copper, gold, tin, platinum, lead and zinc. In fact, the word "Andes" means "copper color" in the Peruvian Indian language. Without the mining industry, people such as my uncle, who owns a small jewelry store in Buenos Aires, wouldn't be able to make a living.



The Andes meet the Pacific Ocean.

<http://www.patagonia-road.com/photos/pacific-ocean-coast-chile.jpg>

There's some other cool stuff to see here, especially wherever the mountains meet the ocean. There are rivers cutting huge canyons, majestic cliffs next to sandy beaches, and a beautiful coastline. Too bad you can't take pictures deep underwater, or you could look at the huge trench that runs parallel to the Andes at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. It's a huge underwater canyon that is thousands of meters deep and filled with sediment. My younger brother Roberto and I like to go scuba diving around that area and collect shells, but we could never dive into the depths of this trench, which plunges more than 5,000 m (16,404 ft) below sea level.

Let me tell you about the natural disasters we have to deal with as natives of this area. First, there are about thirty active volcanoes. Although they are quite beautiful to look at, the ash clouds that pour out of them create hazards for airplanes as well as for people on the ground. I also have relatives in Chile whose homes were destroyed by mudflows. Mudflows occur when volcanic debris mixes with water. The mudflows race down steep slopes at great speeds and destroy everything in their paths!

Earthquakes happen all the time around here – small and big ones. In fact, the biggest earthquake ever recorded in history (8.5 on the Richter scale) occurred near here in 1960. Thousands of people were killed and millions of homes were destroyed. The intense shaking caused by earthquakes also causes landslides that can injure residents and creates tsunamis (big ocean waves) that can affect places as far away as Australia!

Good luck studying the beautiful Andes!

Sincerely,
Pablo Fuentes
33°S 70°W



Many homes were destroyed in one of the biggest earthquakes ever recorded.

http://www.mines.utah.edu/geo/courses/UOnline/E&V_figs/eqke/Chile_eqke3.jpg